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ABSTRACT

A study of social and cultural factors that affect the appropriateness of verbal expressions in different languages focuses on the comparative uses of three common expressions ("thank you, I'm sorry, excuse me" and their equivalents) in English and Chinese. First, the usage patterns of the three expressions are explained briefly, and the study is then described. In the study, a Chinese and English version of a questionnaire were administered to two groups of university students: 19 English-dominant students of Mandarin Chinese at the City College and 26 Mandarin-dominant students of English from English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at Taiwan Normal University. The questionnaires consist of 15 vignettes with questions designed to elicit appropriate verbal behaviors and the reasons for them. Results show that the two subject groups' answers did not correspond on nine of the vignettes, suggesting significant differences in perception of the appropriate behaviors in specific situations. Implications for cross-cultural communication are discussed. (MSE)

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TITLE: **SOCIAL INFLUENCE ON VERBAL EXPRESSIONS: CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE PEOPLES OF TAIWAN, R.O.C. AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

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I. Introduction:

We have long realized that no language can be taught in a vacuum. In addition to linguistic knowledge, many other elements, such as social and cultural influences, are also part of language formation. This is one reason that translation and interpretation of expressions and behaviors from culture to culture or ethnic group to ethnic group can be difficult. Literal translation not only is insufficient to the needs of second language learners but is likely to create friction between the language learners and the native speakers. This friction arises from the speaker's ignorance of key background information which had been either left out of, or misrepresented in teaching materials. Native speakers acquire these cultural connotations of communicative acts through implicit reinforcement from the community (Hymes, 1972, Gumperz, 1972, Barnlund, 1988); second language learners do not have this benefit. If we, the educators, wish our students not only to learn a language but also to be able to function in the target society, we must bring them to an awareness of cultural influences from their first moment of contact with the language (Seelye, 1988). It is upon us, the language teachers, to make this **implicit learning explicitly taught.**

In reviewing Immigration Bureau files dealing with Chinese who came into the U.S. while the Chinese Exclusion Law was in effect from 1882 through the 1940s at the National Archival North Eastern Regional Office, one constantly finds interrogations deciding the fate of Chinese who were questioned under the total cultural ignorance of both parties. This ignorance created misunderstandings and intensified stereotyped images and fear toward each other. Chinese people from excluded groups, specifically laborers, tried to circumvent the law by supplying the examiners from the Immigration Office with the information which they thought the officers wanted to hear. The U.S. Immigration officers examined these people and tried to catch points suspicious to an Occidental frame of reference. In China, precision and number have never been crucial

elements in daily living, especially when Chinese uses a different system of measure units and calendar. The Chinese were not trained to express themselves or view the world with exact and precise measurement. Therefore questions about the birthdays of oneself or one's relatives and questions about geographical distances were not generally answered with precise numbers. When the Chinese emigrants were able to answer such questions without hesitation or mistakes, it was only because they had been coached. However, the interviewers firmly believed that if a person could not remember his/her birth date or birthplace or the distance between the two villages in questions, or if dates or numbers did not match between two testimonies, then the interviewees were attempting fraud.

Another interesting point was that if the Immigration officials had paid more attention to the communication among family members instead of trying to test people with birth dates, they would have been more likely to catch false testimonies. A true father and son would not lose direct contact with each other while they were both living. The son might not know the exact address of his father because of the distance and lack of knowledge about the U.S., but he would definitely know how to get in touch with his father once he landed, through personal contacts.

Even today, Chinese names and calculations of age are still mysteries to Western minds. The order of first name and surname is the most confusing part. Chinese first names come after surnames while English first names come before surnames. It has occurred more than once that Chinese students who use romanized spelling of their names can not locate their personal or academic files by their last names in an alphabet filing system in a university office. In order to find their files, they must try every part of their names, same as picking lottery numbers, any number is possible.

Age and birth date are another confusing part. The day a Chinese baby is born, s/he is one year old. After that, every Chinese will grow one year older at the New Year's Day. One's birthday is not for celebration because that is the day that one's mother

suffered in giving birth. On top of different concepts of birthdays and different calculations of age, Chinese use the lunar calendar which calculates days with a different system. The month in a lunar calendar follows the cycle of the moon. There are no fixed days for a designated month from year to year. Depending upon the cycle, there are either twenty-nine days or thirty days per month; and in every five years, there are two years with thirteen months. The extra month is called leap month, which is also either twenty-nine days or thirty days depending upon the cycle of the moon at the time. A leap month usually falls between February to October and follows the month that it repeats. However, it does not necessary follow the exact days of the month that it repeats. April, May, and June are the three months that have the highest frequency of being a leap month. A Chinese will be most likely to have more birthdays than his/her Western counterparts if his/her birthday is somewhere between April to June. If unfortunately, the person's birthday is on the thirtieth of a month, s/he is going to have fewer birthdays than his/her Western counterparts. Therefore, following the Western custom: to calculate ages by birth dates, some Chinese will be much older than they really are and some will be much younger than their age group. Nowadays, under the influence of West, both Chinese adult and children celebrate birthdays as do their Western counterparts.

II. Expressions in focus

As we discussed above, translation from language to language involves more than just semantic conversion, it also involves social and cultural messages hidden behind the words. "Thank you versus 謝謝 xiexie, excuse me versus 對不起duibuqi/不好意思 buhao yisi, and I'm sorry versus 對不起 duibuqi" are three sets of expressions which are generally used in language textbooks and classrooms as equivalent expressions, whether it is in CSL classes for English speakers or ESL classes for Chinese speakers. In actual usage, these assumed equivalent expressions overlap only in certain of the semantic

spheres and functions which they are said to fill. These are phrases in daily use with very specific connotations in each language, connotations which do not coincide completely.

(a) "thank you" versus "謝謝 xiexie"

In English, "thank you" occurs in response to a variety of situations. It often expresses appreciation of the second party's effort, gifts, and/or compliments to the speakers. "謝謝 Xiexie" shares the meaning to appreciate favors and efforts made on the speaker's behalf, but does not function in response to compliments or receiving gifts. A compliment, in Chinese culture, is a social ritual requiring a complicated response. In Chinese there is no simple "thank you" equivalent if someone is complimented. "Humility" is the appropriate attitude in dealing with compliments. That is to say, one must deflect a compliment with denials. One should never simply accept it. This does not mean that Chines people do not appreciate compliments, only that the response to them is different. A Chinese host greets guests with humility at the door by welcoming them to his/her shambles of a small and messy house; before the meal, s/he must apologize for the "coarse dishes" and "unsophisticated cooking skill," and that it is "merely to fill the stomach." (Shen, 1989) This ritual of humility is practiced daily in Chinese households.

(b) "對不起 duibuqi" versus "excuses me"

"Excuse me" can express an apology for intruding on other's peace. In Western societies, for example, bodily sounds are considered rude and embarrassing, and an apology is needed for disturbing others. Both "對不起 duibuqi" and "I'm sorry" are each acceptable response when physical or psychological damage is caused by the speaker. However, bodily sounds, in the eyes of Chinese, are not considered public concerns, thus an understanding smile in acknowledgment is sufficient but not required to relieve the embarrassment.

(c) "對不起 duibuqi" versus "I'm sorry"

"I'm sorry" expresses regret or apology while "對不起 duibuqi" only expresses apology. "I'm sorry" can be used in conversation referring to bad weather, sad incidents, unintentional physical contacts, etc.; while "對不起 duibuqi" is used in apologizing for harm actually done by the addresser to the addressee.

It is appropriate to say "I'm sorry" in English after one hears unfortunate information about others, since "I'm sorry" expresses regret or sympathy. "對不起 Duibuqi" does not share this aspect of "I'm sorry." In Mandarin Chinese, it is used only as an apology as described above. Apologizing to others is a very serious ritual for Chinese and is not a daily action. The ritual for apology takes great effort on the part of the speaker in Chinese custom and so "對不起 duibuqi" carries a much heavier tone in Mandarin Chinese than does "I'm sorry" in English. One may express sympathy with "I'm sorry" to the family members of the deceased at a funeral in the U.S., but one would not use "對不起 duibuqi" to the family members of the deceased at a Chinese funeral. It is not an appropriate expression to use under the circumstance unless the speaker is somehow responsible for the death.

"對不起 Duibuqi" can be used in "humility" practice. Li (1969), a Chinese diplomat, remembered an incident took place in Paris, France in the early twentieth century while he was there serving as a diplomat from the Republic of China. There was a Chinese general who visited Paris at the time and held a dinner party at a distinguished French restaurant in Paris. Before the meal was served, as a good host should do, the general made a welcome speech and apologized for the coarse meal which would be presented to these honorable guests later. The French guests who never experienced this kind of introduction sat silently and uncomfortably. They did not know what and how to respond. The "humility" speech upset the restaurant owner extremely who complained

and insisted on compensation for the loss of reputation. It took a huge effort from Li to explain and clarify the incident.

III. Procedure

In order to illustrate the dangers of using a second or foreign language without comprehensive knowledge of its culture, a questionnaire is designed to search the boundary of these three commonly used expressions in English and their supposed Chinese equivalents.

(a) research methods

Two sets of questionnaires are prepared: one is written in Chinese and the other in English. Each questionnaire consists of fifteen vignettes. Both the English version and the Chinese one are in comparably similar situations. In order to eliminate the possible cultural confusion and influence, the interactors in the English version have English names while the same interactors in the Chinese version use Chinese names. This hopefully will diminish the link between the two cultures and any association from it in answering the questionnaire. Each vignette is followed by two sets of questions. The first set of questions focuses on what the appropriate verbal behaviors are and are followed by four choices of answers. If none of the available choices is desirable to the respondent, there is a blank space provided for his or her specific answer. The second question focuses on the rationale for the first chosen answer. Four answers and a blank space are provided as in the first set.

(b) samples

The English versions of questionnaires are distributed to nineteen students, whose dominate language is English, from Mandarin Chinese classes at the City College, the CUNY, and the Chinese versions are administered to twenty-six students whose dominate language is Mandarin Chinese, from ESL classes at Taiwan Normal University.

(c) hypothesis:

If these expressions are equivalent, both semantically and socially appropriate as claimed in most of the textbooks, then the selected answers by English native speakers and Mandarin Chinese native speakers should be the same in every situation.

IV. Discussion

Nine vignettes out of a total of fifteen vignettes have unmatched answers between English speakers and Mandarin Chinese speakers. "Unmatched" means the highest frequency of answers in the Chinese version is not the supposed equivalent expressions of the highest frequency of answers in the English version. If the numbers of two chosen answers in some vignettes are not significantly different, both responses are taken into count. If the write-in answers start with the expressions in question and follow in the same direction of the answers provided, they are also counted into the numbers of the expressions chosen.

In five of the "對不起 duibuqi" vignettes, only one matches with "I'm sorry" with the intention to apologize; the other four match with "excuse me" in expressing intrusion, warning. While in Vignette 12, "對不起 duibuqi" is chosen to express apology in Chinese and "excuse me" is chosen to express sympathy in English. As for the aspects of regret and sympathy in "I'm sorry," the Chinese equivalent expressions vary according to the situations. There is not one fixed expression to match "I'm sorry" in expressing regret or sympathy. This confirms the suspicion of this writer that these are sources of conflicts for cross-cultural communicating.

Out of six "thank you" vignettes, two match with "不好意思 buhao yisi" and "哪裏！哪裏！ nali nali" to express humbleness and appreciation for Mandarin Chinese speakers while appreciation is the sole purpose for English speakers. The other four match with "謝謝 xiexie" in Chinese in expressing appreciation except one: Vignette 15, in which English speakers choose "thank you" to express appreciation while Chinese

speakers choose "謝謝 xiexie" to express humbleness. In that particular situation, "謝謝 xiexie" is followed by "托您的福 tuo nin de fu (thanks to borrowing your surplus blessings)". Therefore, the "謝謝 xiexie" in the Chinese version of Vignette 15 is not in the same vein of "thank you" in the English version of Vignette 15. Although "謝謝 xiexie" is used in accepting another's congratulations, it must be followed by other expressions to display humbleness. This finding supports the later statement that this is a source for minor cross-cultural discomfort.

V. Conclusion

Language and culture have been closely interwoven with each other since the beginning of human history. Culture is not well explored in second language teaching pertaining to CSL for American English speakers and ESL for Chinese speakers. Most literature in the field to date concentrates on forms of the language more than on social functions and context. This lack of research is one reason why we constantly hear CSL learners greeting Chinese people with "你好嗎 ni hao ma (how are you?)" while Chinese ESL learners tend to answer in detail to the greetings "how are you" (Shen, 1990). These are sources for cross-cultural conflicts. As far as a greeting there is only minor personal discomfort. In more serious cases, especially in the world of business and politics, these cross-cultural miscommunications may have serious consequences. An incident which happened in a Taiwan branch factory of a large US firm specializing in pharmaceutical products is an example for this conflict. The US administrator had a heated argument with his Chinese foreman over the procedure of production. The American manager simply could not comprehend why this stubborn Chinese worker refused to admit that there was a mistake and says, "I'm sorry." From the U.S. managers' point of view, one must admit a mistake has been made before any correction procedure can take place; while Chinese view admitting a mistake has been made is equal to assuming responsibility for the error and assuming its consequence. This involves the "face" of

pertaining party so it would never be considered as an alternative. However, the procedure of correction may be proceeded without any specific worker assuming the responsibility. Another example is that people of the US believe that PRC should not have the benefit of favorable trading status because the ruling class of PRC have not yet openly admitted their wrong doing and apologize for the killing of those students in the Tian An Men Square on June 7, 1989. To openly admit mistakes are made and apologize for it from ruling class is never a method practiced throughout Chinese history. The most the ruling class will do is to return the property that is not destroyed through the ordeal. To apologize openly and to admit there is a mistake is unheard of.

As language educators, to comprehensively present language with its appropriately social and cultural messages to the students is a great challenge. We must rise to the challenging task of presenting language in a more accessible and holistic manner. We must not only promote the general public to learn a second or foreign language, but also educate them to know that learning a second/foreign language is not enough in itself. Though incidents in the Paris restaurant and from the Chinese Exclusion Law files are examples from the late 19th Century and the early 20th Century, other similar examples still occur on a regular basis. If we want to stop these types of problems from recurring, we must remember that mastering the target language is the surface goal while crossing the bridge of communication is the final objective, but without "peripheral" data and understanding that bridge is very difficult to cross.

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